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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ACCRA 001247

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SUBJECT: GHANA'S OPPOSITION NDC ON ELECTION 2008 AND
POSSIBLE U.S. MILITARY BASES

REF: ACCRA 1205

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Classified By: PolChief Scott Ticknor for reasons 1.4 (d) and (e).

¶1. (C) Summary: Poloffs recently met separately with four leaders from the main opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) party. They expressed familiar concerns about implementation of a bill allowing expatriate Ghanaians to vote and were worried about the example set by the recent flawed Nigerian election. The party's main challenges heading toward the 2008 election are its poor finances and "managing" former President Rawlings, they agreed. They depicted the NDC as largely supportive of its presidential candidate John Atta Mills, who is reportedly in good health and traveling extensively on the campaign trail. Several of the NDC contacts assured us that media stories opposing the idea of a U.S. military base in Ghana reflect concerns about sovereignty, not anti-Americanism. End summary.

The ROPA Bill and the Nigerian Election

¶2. (C) Special Assistant to John Atta Mills Ludwig Hlodze told Polchief the main opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) is very concerned about efforts by the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) to implement the Representation of the People Amendment (ROPA) bill, which would give Ghanaian citizens resident overseas the right to vote in Ghanaian elections. The NDC is convinced the NPP will use this bill to try to rig votes. Both he and NDC Deputy General Secretary Baba Jamal told Polchief that the Nigerian election

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raised concerns in the NDC that similar election fraud could happen in Ghana. Hlodze also saw the potential for the ROPA bill to cause regional conflict, if the large number of Ghanaians in Togo, Burkina Faso and Cote d'Ivoire try to vote under the bill. Most of these are without identification and the ensuing disputes about who can and cannot vote could cause legal battles and possible unrest in Ghana and in neighboring states, according to Hlodze.

Discontent in the Land

¶3. (C) Hlodze and Jamal's views on problems in Ghana tracked with those expressed in our recent meetings with NDC Youth Chairman Koffi Adams and prominent NDC Member of Parliament Haruna Iddrisu. All four painted a picture of growing frustration in the country. Energy shortages are having a serious economic impact, they said. Hlodze

highlighted narcotics trafficking concerns, saying the GOG is dragging its feet and arresting small players while ignoring the larger traffickers. The NDC remains frustrated with corruption and poor education performance, he added, also criticizing the GOG's acceptance of the flawed Nigerian elections and its muted response concerning violence against the opposition in Zimbabwe.

¶4. (C) Our NDC contacts were confident their party could win the 2008 election but admitted several handicaps. They depicted the media in Ghana as largely bought off by the GOG and NPP, which allegedly have contributed money to have the NDC depicted in a negative light. All agreed that the NDC has serious financial challenges and shared concerns that the NPP could use its greater financial resources to win votes with money and projects. They were sure that the NPP uses money to buy off confidantes and trouble makers within the NDC. Nevertheless, they acknowledged that some businessmen were contributing discreetly to NDC coffers and said that despite the media's slant, some stories favorable to the NDC had appeared in back pages.

¶5. (C) The NDC leaders were divided on whether former President J.J. Rawlings was a net liability for the party, but admitted that the NDC was stuck with "managing" him as well as possible. Jamal stressed that this is perhaps the NDC's biggest challenge, adding that no one can effectively manage the former President, who remains a larger-than-life icon within the party. Hlodze was firm that Professor Mills is "his own man"; Jamal agreed but opined that Mills will have difficulty managing Rawlings even if he wins the presidency. Jamal believes the NDC cannot win without Rawlings, who he said remains very popular in rural areas, but he conceded that the former President's erratic, outspoken ways have alienated many in the party and continue to scare away many potential voters for the NDC.

Mills as Candidate

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¶6. (C) Jamal told PolChief there is still some friction within the party over Mills' candidacy, although he said this is diminishing. He thought the NDC had no choice but to get behind Mills because of Mills' popularity in the country. Jamal was clear that Rawlings does not like Mills. However, Jamal believes Rawlings feels he has to back Mills because he brought Mills into politics during the 1990s. During a recent tour and breakfast hosted by the Ambassador at the New Embassy Compound, Rawlings made casual comments indicating his support for Mills (though the rock-star enthusiasm Rawlings generated from the Ghanaian workers on site were a vivid display of his charisma and continued political drawing power).

¶7. (C) All our NDC contacts claimed Mills is in good health. Hlodze said Mills was controlling his weight under doctor's orders. Jamal confided that Mills had some kind of throat cancer and said he was on the mend, although not yet fully recovered. In Ghanaian culture, a politician cannot admit to illness, so we should not expect Mills to be forthcoming on this, Jamal added. However, Mills is actively campaigning and should have no trouble running the course of the campaign, Jamal said, while admitting that Mills' voice sometimes gets hoarse on election tours. Iddrisu had recently returned from a campaign swing with Mills in Ghana's three northern provinces, where he said Mills performed well and received enthusiastic receptions.

On Establishing a U.S. Military Base in Ghana

¶8. (C) NDC-leaning newspapers have repeatedly published stories about alleged U.S. plans to establish a military base in Ghana. Iddrisu and Addams explained to Poloff that this

reflects a concern that a U.S. base could compromise Ghana's perceived neutrality and leadership within the African Union and the Non-Aligned Movement. We should interpret the stories in that light, they said, rather than as a sign of anti-Americanism.

Comment

¶ 9. (C) The NDC's concerns are familiar, although our contacts are becoming more candid about the need to "manage" Rawlings. In a recent meeting with PolChief, Electoral Commission Deputy Chairman Sarfo-Kantanka also highlighted managing Rawlings, as well as countering the NDC's Rawlings-era legacy as the party's biggest challenges in 2008 (reftel). An April 2007 Economist Intelligence Unit report underscored concerns about Mills' health as a potentially serious handicap for the NDC in the upcoming election. For the moment, this issue has faded somewhat among political pundits here, but if Mills shows more visible signs of poor health in the coming year, this will likely be an important factor in the election.

¶ 10. (C) Iddrisu's and Addams' take on the military base issue makes sense. Ghanaians are generally very pro-American and NDC officials are somewhat less anti-USG than in the past, although some resent our strong relationship with the GOG and wish we were more critical of it. During the recent NEC tour, Rawlings and his entourage were enthusiastic about our new facility and warm toward the Ambassador. Sensitivity about a potential U.S. military presence in Ghana (AFRICOM or otherwise) cannot be viewed as an NDC issue. The smaller Nkrumahist Convention People's Party (CPP) has been the most vocal critic on this issue, tapping into a more broadly held concern about sovereignty, international optics and political repercussions (even within the GOG).

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